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ABSTRACT

A survey of books for young people reveals that some of the best (and even award-winning) novels deal with the controversial issue of religion. Although most of these books deal with religion only in the background, some clearly present this issue in the forefront. One book, Cynthia Rylant's "A Fine White Dust" (1986), traces a religious quest. In this story the reader sees a young man, at the end of the seventh grade, making a revival which will change his life. The pattern is a rather common one--when religion is portrayed as a sincere faith or relationship with God, it is usually seen as a positive benefit. When churches or religious leaders are portrayed, their image is often negative, as seen in "Is That You, Miss Blue?" by M. E. Kerr. Organized religion as experienced in a religious school is a sham compared to the true religious experience of the heroine. "Beyond the Chocolate War" (1985) by Robert Cormier and "Tree by Leaf" (1988) by Cynthia Voight are representative of novels that depict the suffering of religious people in their quest for personal meaning. These and other books show the hunger for God and the search for spiritual meaning in life present in young people today, and, as such, are worthy of study. (A list of 10 religious books for adolescents is attached.) (KEH)

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RELIGION AS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH OR WEAKNESS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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RELIGION AS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH OR WEAKNESS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

According to polls, most American maintain a belief in a Supreme Being and a very large number of us attend a church, synogogue, or temple at least sometimes. Religion is alive in America and in the children in our schools.

Yet most children's books studiously avoid any mention of religion. In children's books we may find detailed descriptions of personal behavior, we may know all the dark secrets of young people and the way they relate to their parents, their teachers, and each other, including detailed sexual relations. In all of these we may find strong evidence of a value system at work. But very rarely will that value system be tied to any religion. The "r" word religion is often just not mentioned.

Now, of course, religion is avoided in books for the same reasons that schools do not allow public praying and that Christmas scenes may display Santa Claus but not Jesus and Mary. Separation of church and state is taken quite seriously.

But religion will not go away, nor is it really considered merely a private concern. Churches constitute strong and influential institutions. Even if religion were merely a private concern, children's books, as we have seen, do not shy away from private concerns. Rather the issue seems to be that a discussion of religion at all will offend the non-religious, while a sympathetic portrayal of any particular

religious group may be seen as proselytizing; on the other hand, an unsympathetic portrayal may be seen as offensive and discriminatory. With these considerations in mind, it is easy to see why authors would just as soon avoid it altogether.

But to avoid discussing religion is just as bad as avoiding discussing sex or politics. They may be controversial issues, but they are the most interesting and the most likely to affect people in their deepest beliefs and feelings.

For these reasons some of the most powerful books for young people are those in which the author had the courage to talk about religion. A survey of such young adults books revealed that although there were not many, they were often some of the best books, even award-winning ones. I shall mention only some of them here, but I wish to make it clear that these are not all. Some of the books deal with religion only in the background although it is integral to the story. Examples are some of the books of Katherine Paterson such as Jacob Have I Loved (1980)and Bridge to Terabithia (1977). In others religion is clearly in the forefront and is the story itself.

One of the books in which the story is a religious quest is Cynthia Rylant's A Fine White Dust (1986). In this story we see a young man, Peter, at the end of the seventh grade, making a revival which will change his life.

Peter does not become religious that summer. He has always been so. He mentions that although his parents don't go to church, he does. Religion attracts him and he finds that he "likes" Jesus. The reader cannot doubt the sincerity of this

boy's attraction nor can one help but feel his fear of hell, of having that beautiful Jesus reject him.

That summer is a long boring one and Peter feels that although he always enjoyed them, he is now too old to attend a Vacation Bible School. Then the revival preacher hitch-hikes into town. Interestingly enough, when Peter first sees him, he thinks of the hitch-hiker as an axe murderer who may claim him as his next victim.

He is indeed the next victim but in a manner far different than he expects. Peter is strongly attracted to this preacher; the first night of the revival Peter is "saved" and he feels so happy, so cleansed, so safe. Some of the effects are not so good: a conflict with his parents and with his best friend. But the preacher, James W. Carson, reaches out to him, sees into his very soul, and tells him he knows that Peter too is called to be a preacher. Will he leave home and accompany him on his travels and preaching? Peter, although in great pain at leaving, says he will go. He does not go. The preacher leaves without him, although not alone. He takes with him the girl who works at the cafe.

Now Peter knows what hell truly is and for a while he is there. Slowly he finds his way out and slowly he realizes that he is most fortunate: he has parents who will never leave him and the best friend in the world, Rufus, who rescued him the night he waited in vain for three hours at the gas station.

In the end, Peter says of the broken pieces of a Bible School ceramic cross, "the pieces aren't him (Carson) at all. They're me. They're me and God and all the powerful feelings I

have about God". And then he says, "The Preacher man is behind me. But God is still right there, in front."(Rylant, 106)

The pattern of this book is rather a common one: when religion is portrayed as a sincere faith or relationship with God, it is usually seen as a positive benefit. When churches or religious leaders are portrayed, their image is often negative.

There are some churches that come off well. For the most part, they are those which demand a renunciation of modern life. Orthodox Judaism, such as is found in books by Chaim Potok, with its requirements that oppose the modern materialistic world usually makes its adherents strong, as do Quakers and Shakers, as seen, for example, in Robert Newton Peck's book A Day No Pigs Would Die (1972).

When personal religious experience is seen as positive or a source of strength, that strength will certainly be needed. For religious people suffer in books.

It is almost as if as long as one simply retains the trappings of religion one is readily accepted. As soon as one take religion seriously, one is suspect.

Nowhere is this shown more powerfully than in the book Is that You, Miss Blue? by M.E. Kerr (1975). The setting is Charles School in Virginia. Charles School is a private Episcopalian school for girls, some of whom are there on scholarships like Carolyn Cardmaker who is smart and whose father is a minister. Others are like the heroine of this story, Flanders Brown, who is sent there after her parents separate and neither can take her right now. Cardmaker

immediately lays it out for Flanders: "The choir wears crosses and Reverend Cunkle wears one. Some of the faculty wear them, a few students wear them, and Miss Blue is worn by one. You'll be seeing a lot of crosses, don't worry."(Kerr, 11).

Miss Blue, who calls Jesus her Buddy, is also probably the best teacher at the school. Yet when she tells the others that Jesus has visited her in her room and he knew that she knew he was there, she is treated as mentally unstable. Whatever her religious experience is, the administration does not want her to stay and soon she is sent away, although not without a gift from a certain number of the students who give a gift they have no right to give.

Cardmaker, the Preacher's kid, as she calls herself, is poor and resentful of the fact that her father chooses his work and calling over opportunities to make money. Flanders' father seems willing to make money any way he can. He is an atheist, although Flanders is not.

Cardmaker decides that she will be an atheist: God never helped her much. The interplay in this book between belief and unbelief, religious experience and worldly experience, sincerity and falsehood, even between men and women is powerful. And again organized religion as portrayed in this religious school is a mere sham compared to the true religious experience of Miss Blue and the depth of Cardmaker's faith that even disillisionment cannot destroy.

Other books that take place in a religious school are The Chocolate War (1974).and Beyond the Chocolate War (1985) by Robert Cormier. The school, Trinity High School, is staffed

with Catholic religious brothers, although there is little relgion here. Instead we find the Vigils, a student group who run the student body and make life miserable for the weak and the young. Archie Costello, the leader of the Vigils, has his counterpart in Brother Leon who eventually runs the school. There are other brothers who are kind, such as the gentle Brother Eugene, but he has a nervous breakdown and eventually dies. He is too sensitive for this cruel world.

In the second book of the series, things have not changed. However, Jerry Renault, victim of the first book, finds redemption. He spend time with relatives in Canada where he finds what he calls "The Talking Church." It (or maybe God) speaks to him. Later he faces up to his enemy, the animal-like Emile Janza. Janza tries to fight him, but he refuses. And by refusing to fight, Jerry wins. The Christ image could not be more obvious. Given a choice, Jerry returns to Trinity High School.

God's voice is heard also in Tree by Leaf (1988) by Cynthia Voight. Clothilde, whose life is falling apart around her (father home from World War I with a horribly disfigured face; rejection by wealthy grandparents; brother leaving to accept the life style of grandparents; favorite maid leaving to go and work in the mill; mother at loose ends), has a religious experience one day as she walks in the beautiful woodland that was deeded to her strangely by a great aunt. She is called to the woods by a Voice which seems to be everywhere and all around her. She asks for four things from the Voice: that her brother not leave on a cruise, that her maid not be hurt by her

father (who had been abusing her), that her own father get better, and that the land remain hers. Only to the last does the Voice say no. In the end all of the wishes come true, but not the way she had thought of them. The land remains hers but only until she passes it on; no one can keep land forever.

Is this Voice God? That is not clear. What is clear is that Clothilde thinks of it as God. Earlier in the book she thinks of God and thinks she could do better if she were God. But later she changes her mind; she knows she would not make a good God. She also searches for God in the church but does not find Him. Clotilde is not much of a church person, but she is deeply spiritual.

In Judy Blume's Are You There, God, it's Me, Margarent? (1970) Margaret is searching not just for God but for a religion. She tries various church services, only to find that none of them satisfy the hunger of her heart for communication with God. All through the story, Margaret talks to God with the fresh sincerity of a young girl who has found that no matter what happens, God is there is listen and understand. She prays to have her period, prays for a bra and something to put in it, prays for relationships to work out. But her contact with God is much more than one of always asking for things. She just wants God to share her life with her.

The hunger for God, religious experience, spiritual meaning of life is as certainly present in young people today as it ever was. It is only unfortunate that churches which are supposed to provide an answer to such yearings often betray their members. At least they often do in children's books.

Religion as a Source of Strength or Weakness in Young Adult Literature

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